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SUBJECT: SINGAPORE'S NEW MALAY/MUSLIM PAP MP CANDIDATES

REF: SINGAPORE 1289

¶1. (U) Summary. Four new Muslim candidates will be running for Parliament on the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) slate, replacing four retiring Muslim members of Parliament (MPs). All four are highly educated, successful professionals with international experience. Only one, however, has the religious background, community recognition, and Malay-language skills to make him broadly appealing to Singapore's Malay/Muslim minority. End summary.

¶2. (U) Over several weeks, Singapore's People's Action Party (PAP) unveiled four new Malay/Muslim candidates for the 2006 general elections: Mr. Zulkifli Masagos Mohamad, 42, vice president of SingTel's global offices and president of a Malay/Muslim grassroots group; Dr. Fatimah Lateef, 40, an emergency physician and humanitarian worker; Mr. Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim, 38, a professor of real estate at the National University of Singapore and PAP activist; and Mr. Zaqy Mohamad, 31, regional director of an information technology company.

¶3. (U) The candidates represent a new generation of Malay/Muslim leader -- young, well-educated professionals with extensive international experience. In the past, most Muslim MPs were teachers, journalists, or trade unionists. Having succeeded under Singapore's meritocratic system, this new batch of potential MPs supports the PAP's claim that opportunities are available for those who work hard. They also share the GOS vision of a secular, pluralistic society, and have been active in community groups that cut across religious lines.

Mr. Masagos Zulkifli

¶4. (U) Mr. Masagos Zulkifli bin Masagos Mohamad, 42, is the only one of the four new Muslim MPs who speaks Malay fluently and has strong religious credentials and experience in serving Singapore's Malay/Muslim community. Active in the Muslim grassroots organization Perdaus since 1992, he has served as its president since 1999. Masagos expanded Perdaus' mission from only offering Islamic education to providing social services (such as child care centers) regardless of religious affiliation. At Perdaus, he co-founded Mercy Relief, which aids victims of natural disasters. Under Masagos' leadership, Perdaus maintained close ties to the conservative Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association (Pergas). Muslim community leaders have speculated that Masagos may eventually succeed Dr. Yaacob Ibrahim as Minister in Charge of Muslim Affairs. Masagos himself notes that his National Service as a police officer and his international business experience make him a versatile MP who could hold many different portfolios.

¶5. (U) Masagos is Vice President of Global Offices for SingTel, where he has worked for 18 years. With SingTel, he worked in Sulawesi, Indonesia for three years and later spent

three years in Sydney, Australia. Masagos studied for a year at the University of Southern California. He graduated from Singapore's Nanyang Technological Institute with an engineering degree. He is married and has four children.

Dr. Fatimah Lateef

16. (U) Dr. Fatimah Lateef, 40, is an emergency medicine specialist and humanitarian worker. She has worked overseas as a physician in India, the United Kingdom, and the United States (at the Medical College of Virginia). As a volunteer, and now a director, of Mercy Relief she has led many relief missions to disaster sites. She joined the PAP in 1986 when it established a youth wing (Young PAP). As the first single Muslim woman to serve in Parliament, Dr. Fatimah told us she feels she is under more pressure (and scrutiny) than any of the other MPs because she will have to represent Muslims, women, and her electoral district. Unlike the other female Muslim MP, Dr. Fatimah covers her hair only to pray. After some concerns about her "modern image," she appeared at a press event wearing a traditional Malay/Muslim woman's dress but still minus a headscarf.

Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim

17. (SBU) Mr. Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim, 38, is assistant professor of real estate at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He is part of the PAP grassroots team that, led by the more independent-minded PAP MP Charles Chong, successfully lobbied the government to open a dormant metro station. Faishal, who chairs a Young PAP branch, has also been involved with Muslim organizations. He was a member of

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the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), and a member of his mosque's management board. Muhammad Faishal attended public schools and the National University of Singapore, then earned his PhD from the University of Manchester. From a humble background, he believes that Malays can achieve whatever they want through hard work. He is married and has two children, aged 6 and 10. Muhammad Faishal was apparently a last-minute substitute brought in after the PAP's star prospective Muslim candidate unexpectedly declined to run, and the initial replacement candidate, according to Masagos, proved unacceptable to some sections in the community during his trial launch.

Mr. Zaqy Mohamad

18. (SBU) Mr. Zaqy Mohamad, 31, was the first new Muslim candidate the PAP announced. He is a regional director at a technology company and previously worked at IBM. Although touted as a grassroots activist, leaders of several Muslim religious and secular groups told us they had never heard of Zaqy. Defence Minister Teo Chee Hean reportedly spotted Zaqy when he agitated against university fee increases as president of the student union at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University (NTU). Zaqy, who comes from a middle-class, English-speaking family, graduated from the prestigious Raffles Institution. He is married and has two children.

The four outgoing Muslim MPs

19. (SBU) These four new candidates replace four outgoing PAP Muslim MPs: Othman Harun Eusofe, Yatiman Yusof, Mohamad Maidin Packer, and Ahmad Khalis Abdul Ghani. Othman and Yatiman, in their 60s, were expected to retire. The PAP asked Ahmad Khalis, who belongs to the conservative group Muhammadiyah and sends his daughters to full-time Islamic religious schools, to step down after just one term. Tapped in 2001 to appeal to more conservative elements of the Muslim

community, Khalis did not condemn Islamic terrorism strongly enough, according to Muslim reporters and PAP volunteers. Mohamad Maidin Packer, 48, Parliamentary Secretary for Home Affairs, had strongly supported the GOS stand against Islamic terrorism. He was reportedly forced out, however, because he represented an alternative power center to Minister in Charge of Muslim Affairs Dr. Yaacob Ibrahim. The Malay language newspaper, Berita Harian, had strongly supported Maidin -- a former editor of that paper -- with laudatory articles.

Role models?

¶10. (U) The PAP expects its Muslim MPs to be role models for the community, encouraging Singapore's Muslims to be part of the national mainstream (i.e., modern, English-speaking, and secular) and to raise their education and skills. At the same time, Muslim MPs must link the Muslim community and the GOS and resolve problems connected to Islam. Journalists and Muslim community leaders have questioned whether Singapore's Malay/Muslim minority will see the new PAP Muslim candidates as credible spokesmen for their concerns about language, culture, and religion.

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